

John Foster. *Oil and World Politics: The Real Story of Today's Conflict Zones: Iraq, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Ukraine and More*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers, 2018. Pp. 280.

In *Oil and World Politics*, John Foster argues that there has been a paradigm shift in the factors which shape, reshape and reinforce global political and economic relations. Just as spices held sway in ancient times, Foster observes the overarching influence of hydrocarbon in today's global politics. Building upon the scholarship of Francisco Parra, Paul Sabin, Jianhua Yu and Yichen Dai, Foster goes beyond the peripherals to show that, irrespective of theoretical paradigm employed to understand global conflicts, the most significant issue remains the struggle among state actors to have sustainable and unrestricted access to crude oil.¹

Oil and World Politics consists of ten chapters, each bearing a plethora of sources for further reading, with several maps, pictorials and a selected bibliography. Each chapter details critical epistemological insights over issues commonly within the ambit of unsubstantiated theories such as the linkages between Western needs for oil and the removal of leaders, most especially from third world states, as in the case of Libya. The idea that developed economies such as the US, Russia, UK, Canada, and France would prefer most third world economies with quantum oil facilities to remain underdeveloped is not unconnected to their belief that should these underdeveloped societies develop, they might lose easy access to these oil fields. This idea is strongly substantiated given the unavoidable role of oil (energy) in the trajectories of human development since the era of the hunter-gather epoch.

Foster uses very recent narratives to show how oil has become a top priority and “has been a major reason for British, French and U.S. involvement in the Middle East” since the twentieth century (p. 16). Foster begins by showing how oil has been a predetermining factor in geopolitical strategizing among states. To give a clear illustration of this, he narrates certain global incidences that rocked the global

¹ See, for example, Francisco Parra, *Oil Politics: A modern history of Petroleum* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010); Paul Sabin, *Crude Politics: The California Market, 1900-1940* (California: University of California Press, 2004); Yu Jianhua and DAI Yichen, “Energy Politics and Security Concepts from Multidimensional Perspectives,” *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (In Asia)*, 6,4 (year): 91-120.

political space, such as the Gulf War and its effects on the political economy of oil across the globe. In Chapter Two, Foster argues that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the George W. Bush administration was a calculated attempt to gain access to Iraqi oilfields under the smokescreen of promoting democratisation and human rights. Three points are emphasized: first, Foster observes that the West has had an interest in Iraqi oil since the start of the twentieth century. The second point is the role of the media in the gamut of events that transpired during the period. Finally, the US invasion triggered an internal division amongst Iraqis, which to date is still causing instability within the Persian Gulf region.

In Chapter Three, Foster argues that the protracted conflict that has ravaged Syria is also situated within this geopolitical context since the Syrian state itself “is aligned with Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Some analysts refer to a ‘Shia Crescent’ – a half-moon shaped region linking people of these four countries” (p. 59). Of course, Syria’s position within the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea makes it a valuable prize among states, as “some countries would earn transit revenue from having the pipeline within their country and other countries would earn nothing” (p. 60). The Syrian crisis has lingered for so long because of the struggle between the US and Russia to gain full control of Syria’s oil and strategic routes. Russian and American support for the Syrian government and rebel forces, respectively, could be likened to a neo-Cold War. Supporting the position of Foster, Erwin Van Veen notes that Syria “is also a (proxy) battleground for various regional and global power competitions that have superimposed themselves on the drivers of local conflict.”² The ripple effects on the Syrian state are alarming and present many questions. As Foster asks, “Who would be responsible for paying for Syria’s reconstruction after the war?” (p. 84)

Iran’s desire to acquire nuclear weapons and alleged involvement in terrorism has placed the Persian Gulf state on the blacklist of the US and her allies. These developments earned Iran and other countries, such as North Korea and Iraq, inclusion under an “Axis of Evil” (p. 85). Similar to his analyses on Iraq, Foster posits that Iran has persistently had to suffer a series of sanctions, not because any connections in sponsoring terrorism have been sufficiently proven, but

² Erwin Van Veen, “The Geopolitics of Syria’s Reconstruction: A Case of Matryoshka,” *Syria Studies*, 11(1), 2019, 33-56.

because its relationships with countries like Russia, Pakistan, and China exasperates the US's and other NATO countries' oil security policies, most especially within the Persian Gulf region. Considering the African continent, Foster illuminates how the struggle for oil security is caught in the web of persistent conflict between the West and Libya under Muammar Gaddafi's regime. As is typical of the West, the smokescreen remains democratisation and the protection of human rights. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was adopted to intrude into Libya's oil reserves, which eventually led to the death of Gaddafi, thus creating another failed state in Africa.

In Chapter Six, Foster demonstrates the long-standing importance of transit routes, especially those scattered across various waterways. Foster stresses how chokepoints and straits have become critical issues in oil politics, often causing conflict between major oil players, pirates and terrorist groups. Emphasis, however, is placed on certain regions such as the Strait of Gibraltar, Strait of Hormuz, and Bab El-Mandab. Others are the Strait of Malacca, the Suez Canal, and other strategic coastlines which are important for oil exporting and importing business across the globe. Foster argues that the spate of recurring insecurity issues across the various chokepoints and straits have necessitated the US and NATO to urge for security improvements in regions such as Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen, among others. But at whose expense are these security measures? Foster muses that "the losers are taxpayers and people who are inevitably collateral damage in countries being patrolled," a majority of whom reside in Africa and the Middle East (p. 140). Moreover, the case of Afghanistan and the Tapi Pipeline presents yet another episode of an oil (covert motive)–counterterrorism (overt) linkage. As he observes, "of course, the War on Terror was about control – it had nothing to do with democratization" (p. 148). In discussing the issues of oil, security and the US's interest in Afghanistan, Foster shows that there are many issues left to address. Foster's major concerns revolve around the question of whether or not Afghanistan has the capability to secure the Tapi Pipeline from potential internal threats that might lead to further instability as seen in the cases of Iraq and Libya.

The last three chapters (–Eight to Ten) move beyond Africa and the Middle East as Foster shifts his analysis to Ukraine to support his argument that oil is central to global politics. The struggle for the Crimean region holds grave importance for Russia's international economic success, given the fact that Russia has limited sea routes

to conduct global trade all year round. Unfortunately, since 2014, there have been several economic embargoes and political-diplomatic disputes between the US, Russia, and Ukraine over the acquisition or dispossession of the Crimea. The conflict between the US and Russia over the Crimean region presents yet another platform for both the US and Russia in the twenty-first century to engage in further rounds of the Cold War.

Chapters Nine and Ten explore several ongoing issues and theories which could help decipher the recurring tensions in many quarters of the world, most especially on the question of how and to what extent does the privatisation of states' oil fields affect the lives of citizens. How have citizens reacted to government insensitivities towards their plight? In Foster's view, such actions by governments have the potential of creating internal conflicts, especially within those states whose citizens feel that the oil within their geographical space is not being put to proper use for the enhancement of their day-to-day lives. Upon the application of Foster's argument, the Nigerian Niger Delta Insurgency becomes easier to comprehend. Internal struggles in states have often attracted embargoes and sanctions from global governmental organizations. Although these issues could, according to Foster, be resolved if privatisation in the oil sector is properly implemented along the conditions of international financial institutions, which in most cases remains a herculean task to achieve given the nature of economic structures in most third world economies where such issues of oil and conflict are rife.

Having spent well over thirty years as an economist with British Petroleum, John Foster has compiled a detailed text which captures the real source behind most contemporary conflicts across the world. His ability to lucidly present his arguments with sufficient data, mostly from memos and correspondence, and a historical analytical style makes for easy comprehension. However, given the fact that the text is a product of work experiences gathered over many years, it is only logical that Foster omitted certain helpful theoretical paradigms such as a literature review. That notwithstanding, *Oil and World Politics* remains a key text for understanding of oil and global politics. A well-researched text with sufficient primary sources helps substantiate the long-purported view that most conflicts across the globe are connected to the struggle over oil and its variegated subsidiaries. *Oil and World Politics* is recommended to those who wish to expand their knowledge of oil's role in international conflict.

It is, therefore, safe to conclude that a vast majority of world conflicts are embedded in the intricacies of states' struggles for control over oilfields, strategic routes and secure access to vital economic interests. As Foster postulates, until a new variable emerges, oil to a large extent will continue to determine how conflicts across the globe are triggered, sustained and possibly resolved.

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